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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: GOVERNMENT CALLS FOR BABY BOOM BUT TURKMEN
FAMILIES UNLIKELY TO OBEY

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. SUMMARY: Alarmed at falling birth rates, the Government of Turkmenistan is taking new steps to encourage families to have more children. The government provides modest benefits for mothers and children, and is trying to come up with other new ways to persuade women to have more babies. Turkmen women, however, are unlikely to heed the call, given the difficult economic conditions and the troubled health care system here. If the government were to focus more on improving the quality of, and access to public healthcare, and took a stab at reducing corruption, the population decline could be potentially slowed or stopped. END SUMMARY.

MODEST INCREASE IN BENEFITS

¶3. (SBU) On March 6, local press reported that the president signed a law amending the Social Welfare Code of Turkmenistan. The change modestly increases maternity benefits that Turkmen women will receive beginning on July 1, 2009. The benefits include a one-time "maternity grant," as well as a monthly allowance for all mothers with children under the age of three. The new benefits will also be dispersed retroactively, meaning that all families with children under the age of three on July 1, not just children born after that date, will receive benefits, the semi-official website Turkmenistan.ru reported. The new social welfare code appeared in the March 7 issue of the official paper Neytralniy Turkmenistan, but the code did not provide details regarding the amount of benefit payments. A Pol/Econ local staff member contacted a Ministry of Social Welfare official and learned that the traditional one-time maternity grant paid to a mother for the birth of her first and second child increased from 100 manat (\$35) to 130 manat (\$46); from 200 manat (\$70) to 250 manat (\$88) for a third child; and from 400 manat (\$141) to 500 manat (\$176) for a fourth child. The monthly child care allowance increased from 55 manat (\$19) to 65 manat (\$23).

¶4. (U) After the new year, President Berdimuhamedov publicly called for a baby boom in Turkmenistan and promised to enhance government assistance to families with young children. "We are allocating 230 million manat (\$81 million) to increase child care benefits," Berdimuhamedov said during the opening session of

Turkmenistan's new parliament on January 9. "We must develop and provide a system of privileges for the protection of motherhood and childhood, and encourage women to have three, four, five and more children," he said. "A mother who cares for a child under three years of age must want for nothing," he declared.

WITH EIGHT BABIES YOU GET AN AWARD...

15. (SBU) The government took some initial steps last year to try to improve the birth rate last year. On March 5, 2008 President Berdimuhamedov announced a new award called "Ene Mahri" or "Mother's Tenderness", to be bestowed upon Turkmen women who give birth to and raise eight or more children. The award gives a mother 1,000 manat or \$352 on the first birthday of her eighth child, provided that the previous seven children are alive. In addition to the monetary award, the Ene Mahri title comes with some fringe benefits, including free utilities, public transport, and free dental care. (NOTE: The latter is thought to have been added by President Berdimuhamedov due to his professional experience as a dentist. END NOTE.) However, local residents think it will take more than special awards and the relatively small social package the government is offering to persuade families to have so many children.

INDEPENDENT RESEARCH REVEALS A DECLINING POPULATION

16. (SBU) Accurate, recent demographic statistics, like any other statistic, are secret in Turkmenistan. In 2003, the national statistics agency reported that the population had reached 6.2 million, an increase of 5.2 percent from the previous year. In 2006, however, the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF) estimated

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the population of Turkmenistan was 5,051,000. The UNFP demographic report indicated that in 1995 the fertility rate was 3.7 births per woman, a decline of 1.5 births per woman since 1979. According to the World Population Data Factsheet, in 2008 the fertility rate in Turkmenistan had dropped to 2.9 births per woman. Local residents noted that the drastic decline was obvious. An elementary schoolteacher from Ashgabat, for example, said that in 2007 her school had difficulty filling the slots for first graders, and the school ultimately shifted from three classes of first graders to two classes. A local military recruitment officer said that his office was unable to meet a 2008 recruitment quota because of the declining number of draftees available.

17. (SBU) Independent research published in 2006 on the Communist Party opposition website tm-iskra.org suggested that the country was undergoing a major demographic shift due to its high death rate and low birthrate. The research claimed that beginning in 1992 the birthrate in Turkmenistan had begun a pattern of consistent decline and by 1999 reached zero population growth. The research further claimed that with zero growth and a continued high mortality rate, by 2005 the population had declined by 3 percent, and the population was estimated to be 3,721,000 by January 2006. To provide context to the high death rate, a local Pol/Econ staff member confirmed that within a six-month period last year, seven people died just in her neighborhood, due to illness. A Pol/Econ staff member's neighbor, who works for the Ashgabat funeral office, said that the number of people who died in 2008 was twice that of previous years.

HEALTHCARE CORRUPTION HURTS PRE-NATAL PROSPECTS

18. (SBU) Pol/Econ staffer's female acquaintances told her that fees and bribes required for decent medical treatment keep young families away from regular healthcare. To get qualified obstetrical care, pregnant women have to pay a bribe along with the regular fee.

Normally, women pay up to \$300 for a qualified doctor to assist with childbirth. Often, obstetricians try to persuade pregnant women to have caesarian sections, simply because the operation is expensive and they can earn more money that way, report local staff.

Corruption in the public health system is rampant. Local staff note that in 2006, residents of a village in eastern Turkmenistan were shocked by the story of a young husband who stabbed a doctor who refused to treat his pregnant wife until he paid \$200. While the husband was retrieving the money, his wife died of preventable

causes.

¶9. (SBU) Due to the costs, some women in poor rural families have their babies at home, increasing the risks for both mother and child. Families with multiple children often face malnutrition and other health problems. According to the World Health Organization's 2008 research, the infant mortality rate in Turkmenistan stood at 51.81 per 1,000 births, which puts Turkmenistan next to Cambodia and Afghanistan. A contact who works in the public health system told local staff that if the government wants to encourage women to have more children, it should offer a sound social package, to include adequate financial aid, based on the market costs and inflation rates, and free medical care for mothers and children. An Ashgabat schoolteacher said that the government should introduce a benefit package to help mothers of large families and also single mothers, including free meals for school-aged children. The present benefits package, even with the recent increase in financial benefits is far from being enough to stimulate the birthrate, according to local staff.

TURKMEN FAMILIES SUPPORT FAMILY PLANNING

¶10. (SBU) In present-day Turkmenistan, where unemployment and drug addiction are so prevalent, many women are the only breadwinners in the family. They must work full time, usually away from their homes. In order to feed their families, many young Turkmen women engage in shuttle trading from Iran, Turkey and China. Other women, especially in Turkmenistan's provinces, go to Turkey to work as babysitters or house cleaners. Women like these cannot go on

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maternity leave because they must provide for their dependants. Female government employees, as well, are unlikely to have more children because the government's maternity allowances do not compensate for the loss of their salaries. Even families with adequate incomes often employ family planning due to fears of financial instability and the lack of prospects for their children. In a traditional Turkmen family, having many children was always something for the head of the family to be proud of. Today, Turkmen men strongly support family planning because of the cost of raising multiple children. On the other hand, local staff report that a rumor has begun circulating that the Health Ministry, as a way of heeding the president's call for a baby boom, instructed gynecologists at polyclinics to discourage young Turkmen females from using birth control. A Pol/Econ staffer's health system contact said that if true, such a policy would still do little to raise the birthrate, but would create another opportunity for health workers to demand bribes to provide women with birth control.

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT: The president's call for more babies is unlikely to find support among Turkmen women. Social factors like unemployment, financial insecurity and lack of prospects for children make Turkmen couples think twice before having additional children. The demographic slide would be stopped most effectively if the government infused the country's largely broken health care system with well-trained and well-paid professionals, made health care more accessible for people at all socio-economic levels, and made a serious effort to combat corruption. Short of these measures, the slide is unlikely to slow. END COMMENT.

MILES